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AUTUMN BOOKS

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EXPRESS

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HUEY

[Newton]



#6 (I'LL NEVER FORGET)

By Ken Kelley

I've discovered, over the years, that eavesdropping in a dentist's chair can provide a pure reality hit. Teeth scraping reduces everybody to the same mental and dental pain—a functional simile for Marx's classless society.

A couple of weeks ago I was getting my teeth cleaned and found myself sitting next to an elderly black lady. She was a whole lot angrier about a front page article she'd just read in the *Chronicle* about the funeral of Huey Percy Newton, than she was about her teeth scraping.

"He's our Moses," one prominent black minister had proclaimed about the former Black Panther leader who'd just been assassinated on the mean streets of West Oakland.

"If he's our Moses," the lady said to nobody in particular, "then give me that old Pharaoh Ramses any old day, and I mean that."

Huey had been shot three times in the head by a guy he'd apparently ripped off in various crack deals. The killer, it turned out, was a 25-year-old crack dealer

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Illustration by Charlie Powell

HUEY

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who got his revenge against Huey at 5:30 a.m. Beyond payback, the shooter apparently hoped to earn his stripes with the Black Guerilla Family, which is to the East Bay what the Bloods and Crips are to L.A. Nice bunch of guys, the BGF. Guys who kill people, rip off innocent citizens, terrorize the poverty-stricken neighborhoods they vulturize with their dirty business. Huey, in recent years, had also become a big part of Oakland street life. He was a one-man gang without the support of the bodyguards he'd always been surrounded with in his glory years as the Supreme Commander of the Black Panther Party, back when he could back up his attitude with real muscle—the baddest dude in town.

"I'll tell you one doggone thing," the elderly woman said. "Huey Newton was just a plain old thug. Period. All these fools are trying to make him into a saint, but he was a real-live *sinner*. Comparing him to Dr. King or Malcolm is downright blasphemy, Lord knows."

It's no secret that the Black Guerilla Family has changed dramatically since the days when it was a prison reform movement centerpieced by George Jackson. In fact, at the time of Jackson's aborted escape attempt which ended with him being shot dead, his star was on the ascendant—he was becoming more famous than Huey. Jackson's was an impossible escape attempt, but, in the "prison movement" circle, Huey was considered a chickenshit, if not a downright traitor, for not giving Jackson the Panther logistical support he'd allegedly been promised in the get-a-gun-and-run-for-it jail jump.

However crazy the BGF was then, at least there was a political side to it. Nowadays, the BGF doesn't give a shit about politics—it's m-o-n-e-y. And when the shooting goes down, these days, it's shoot to kill, no matter how trivial a perceived insult, no matter how many innocent people get offed by Uzis and big-bore automatics.

In the days after his assassination, I'd forced myself to reread portions of Huey's two published books, *To Die for the People* and *Revolutionary Suicide* (the last one autographed for me, but we'll get to that later). It reminded me of how much Huey had always been obsessed with death, in whatever context. He was like an Oakland version of an old-time gunslinger tinged with Mao's famous dictum that "Power grows out of the barrel of a gun." And to quote another famous dictum—from Billy the Kid, John Wayne?—"Live by the gun, die by the gun."

Huey didn't die for "the people"—he was murdered because he ripped off the *wrong* people. And the only way he committed "revolutionary suicide" was by being in the wrong place at the right time. But I digress.

After the elderly black woman rinsed her mouth out with very green mouthwash, she tried to explain to the young hygienist who could have been her granddaughter—or great-granddaughter—what she was talking about. But how do you tell a kid who probably hadn't even been born yet about the time when Huey and Bobby Seale, Merritt College students

days—I'll never forget."

She spit out her last Dixiecup full of Scope and got up and left. Her words brought back for me memories of days gone by, quite different memories of Huey than those heard at his funeral. You see, I'll never forget either.

* * *

I'll never forget...

It was a scorching midday near Lake Merritt in the summer of 1970. Huey had just been released from the Alameda County Jail, where he'd spent almost three years in maximum lockup—most of



Huey strode into the adoring crowd of mostly white hero-worshippers—myself included. He stripped off his white T-shirt. Rippling biceps, glistening triceps—he was proud to show and glow, his body honed to textbook perfection.

both, started the Black Panther Party for Self Defense in 1966, and raised the dough for the pump-action shotguns they used to patrol the Oakland ghetto by selling Mao's Little Red Books to white Cal students who ate 'em up like popcorn? It was the *hip* thing to do on campus. Get a couple of extra ones as frat party favors. "I always thought," said the young tooth scraper, "that Huey was a real champion for civil rights. That's what all the black leaders like Cecil Williams and Ron Dellums and Bobby Seale are sayin'."

Her patient looked her dead in the eye. "Look, honey, I grew up in the South. New Orleans, Louisiana. Jackson, Mississippi. I remember those days, when Martin and Malcolm changed things for all of us for the better. To compare Huey Newton to them is a joke. I remember those

those years in solitary confinement. He had partially passed the time bulking out by doing hundreds of push-ups a day and, as he later told me, with each one he'd say in his head, over and over again, "Some-day soon I'll get outta here and be free."

Now, on that hot summer afternoon, he was free—by way of a legal technicality (the judge who'd sentenced him to jail for the murder of an Oakland police officer had misinstructed the jury). He would eventually be recharged, but for the moment, he was free at last.

Huey strode into the adoring crowd of mostly white hero-worshippers—myself included—and gave a very brief speech through a megaphone in his high-pitched singsong voice that so belied his macho public image. After his little speech, to the oohs and aahs of the assembled, he stripped off his white T-shirt. Rippling bi-

ceps, glistening triceps—he was proud to show and glow, his body honed to textbook perfection.

The sunshine provided the sweat, and the sheer sexuality of his presence said, in the most amazing display of downright to-the-bone body language I'd ever witnessed, "Here I am, the complete sexual creature, the guy all you women want and all you guys wish you could be." Admiration from all quarters—including this one.

I was a teenage tenderfoot, both to California and to big-time politics. I had just arrived for what, to me, was a trip to heaven—and I was going to get to meet my political idol. Huey was so much bigger than life.

I was, at the time, Minister of Information for the White Panther Party, based in Ann Arbor, Michigan. You see, in a famous interview in *The Movement*, a prominent left-wing national journal of the times, Huey had called for the formation of a *white* Panther party, and that's what my mentor and best friend poet/scholar/music maniac John Sinclair had decided to do. Although on a vastly different scale, our White Panther Party was trying to be as infamous in our neck of the woods as Huey was in his. We were major troublemakers.

I'd landed in Berkeley with John Sinclair's then-wife, Leni, and her baby daughter, Celia Sanchez Mao Sinclair, at the invitation of another former Ann Arbor denizen named Tom Hayden. Hayden was, back then, going around the country riding the national notoriety he'd gotten from the Chicago 7 conspiracy trial, and saying to one and all that freeing Huey P. Newton was our most important political mission. Indeed, "Free Huey" had, in the nomenclature of the times, become the leftist equivalent of "Heil Hitler." I mean it. And I bought it.

Hayden was, back then, part of a group of Berkeley intellectuals who fashioned a loose-knit commune called the Red Family. (Red, it may have been. Family, as it turned out, it wasn't. Hayden was later purged, taking refuge in L.A. where he met up with Jane Fonda, and we all know too much about that history. Bob Scheer, former *Ramparts* editor—now a political correspondent for the *LA Times*—another key original player in the Red Family, was kicked out around the same time Hayden was, maybe a little later.) To Hayden and the Red Family, Huey Newton was the most important revolutionary to hit this country since Thomas Paine, but we had been invited to the coast for more than just a chance to see our hero emerge from jail. The Red Family wanted to go national, and Hayden figured that they could hook up with us and become a coast-to-coast party.

So at Hayden's behest, our rag-tag White Panther contingent showed up in

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California on the day of Huey's liberation, his prison release. After the joyful scene outside the jail, we went on to a quite informal gathering at the apartment of KPFA's co-founder, the late Elsa Knight Thompson. Huey had put his T-shirt back on by then. Elsa was quite gracious. Huey held baby Celia in his arms and Leni took a picture. It was clear that Huey didn't want to get too deep into politics—after three years in jail, who could blame him? Hayden fidgeted nervously on the couch as Leni, Huey, and I chatted on about other things. I kept trying to ignore Hayden's annoyance—what the *hell* was bugging him, I wondered. After an hour or so, the White Panther contingent left, baby crying for food. I told Huey on my way out that I'd like to do an interview with him for the official White Panther paper, *SunDance*. "Fine," he said. "Get back to me later—Tom knows my number."

And Tom knew mine. He called me up that evening—"Here we are trying to create a national organization, and you're playing Clark Kent." I somehow sensed the courtship was over. A week after our return to Ann Arbor, I got a letter, crisp and rude, saying, in Hayden's ever-so-lazily-hip way, that the Red Family had decided to "do our own thing."

* * *

I'll never forget...

The Huey/Hayden romance soured almost as quickly. Huey went Hollywood before Hayden did. After his release from jail, he became the glamour-boy bauble for the Beverly Hills set. Self-proclaimed guru Baba Ram Dass visited him regularly in his posh penthouse overlooking Lake Merritt—the rent paid for by Huey's Hollywood swells. I was invited over once—I'd since moved to the East Bay. "Lemme show you this," he said as he walked out onto the deck where a high-

powered telescope stood. "Take a look," he said. I did. It dead-eyed on the Alameda County Jail. Not just that—it was focused on the cell in which he'd been imprisoned for so long. I heard later that he insisted all of his visitors take a look. It was, to Huey, his personal lunar eclipse every night.

"How often do you do this?" I asked



As I got to know him better, I found out that Huey was a real-live Jekyll and Hyde case. He could handle his coke okay, and he could handle his booze okay, too—but combine the two, and he became a madman.

him then.

He paused and looked away at the sky, away from the 'scope.

"Maybe twenty times a day—I don't count, but I look."

* * *

I'll never forget...

Huey told me the story later: On a cool Oakland night in 1974, Huey and his then-wife Gwen flew to Florida, and then beat it to Cuba on a sailboat owned by one of his Hollywood friends—a friend who later overdosed on nitrous oxide. It was the drug of choice in the Hollywood hip set back then—laughing gas, Jumpin' Jack Flash. (In a gruesome scene in the true Hollywood horror movie tradition, the guy didn't show up for a party that

was gonna be another night of partying in the pool with big balloons of gas filling the starved lungs. Someone got worried, went to the house, and saw an arm sticking out of the foyer closet. Sho' nuff: corpse inside, attached to a gas tank.)

Anyway, big waves overtook Huey's boat just as the Cuban shore came into view. It was no easy landing. Gwen swam

trial, he recanted his original testimony. Most folks figured Huey had cut a deal with the guy, who didn't want to get hurt again.) The murder charge alleged that he shot a seventeen-year-old prostitute he was trying to pick up who had made the fatal mistake of calling him, when he approached her, "baby."

* * *

I'll never forget...

Huey eventually returned from his Cuban exile, protesting his innocence and saying he was willing to stand trial. In a burst of idealism, I signed on to help him with his public relations. I just somehow didn't want to believe the rumors about him—it was my own political hangover. That's when things started to turn ugly—very ugly. As he got caught up in his increasingly serious legal problems, he'd occasionally unload to his friends—and I guess he thought I was one of them—about what he'd done. I went into a state of semi-shock when he told me, a few months after I started working for him, that he had indeed pulled the trigger on Kathleen Smith, the young prostitute. He was sorry and quite repentant—not, I thought, that that would resurrect her from her lonely grave. "It was stupid, just so fucking stupid," he said over and over as he sat on his couch and drank glass after glass of Courvoisier—"the 'Vas," he called it—and then snorted toot after toot of cocaine in his Oakland living room.

As I got to know him better, I found out that Huey was a real live Jekyll and Hyde case. He could handle his coke okay, and he could handle his 'Vas okay too—but combine the two, and he became a madman.

All night after he 'fessed up to me about his guilt, I sweated in terror, like in one of those '40s gangster B-movies—"What if he remembers what he told me when he wakes up and now I'm dangerous because I know too much and he'll have me shot?"—that kind of thing. When I did wake up, I was alive, awakened by Huey's phone call.

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"Hey, Ken," he said in soothing tones. "I've got a present for you." Great, I thought, forewarned is forearmed. The present, hand-delivered, was an autographed copy of *Revolutionary Suicide*. The inscription read, "To my dear friend Ken, with love and affection." On the cover of the book, of course, was the famous portrait of Huey in his rattan peacock chair, the ultimate '60s symbol of black militance, with Huey sitting with a rifle in one hand and a Zulu spear in the other.

I chose to concentrate on the spear.

* * *

I'll never forget...

Just after Huey decided to face the music and hop-scotch it back to Oakland—and before I started working for him—I did an interview with him for *Oui* magazine. We were to meet early in the morning at the school the Panthers ran for East Oakland kids. (This was the same school that Huey was later charged with embezzling some \$43,000 from, diverting \$13,000 of it for his private use.) Huey had just returned from a weekend of welcome by his Hollywood friends, party-

ing hard for three days.

As I waited, I watched a slew of little kids lining up for dry cooked bacon and stale toast under a huge portrait of Huey that was emblazoned on the cafeteria wall. He was late for our appointed meeting. When he showed up, the kids mobbed him like he was a god. He didn't have much time for them, except to wave. He was clearly zonked out of his head—Hollywood meant cocaine. And he had a stash of it on him, a fact I was to find out when I sat with him in his jet-black stretch Lincoln. His thoughts, on that day, were on other matters—we had to beat it to Sacramento on the double so he could accept an award from the California state legislature, to be presented to him by East Bay Assemblyman Tom Bates, for the Panthers' role in improving the quality of education for Oakland children through the Panther school.

Huey and I sat in the back seat of a car that seemed like a house on wheels to me; I'd never been in a car like it. The driver was a huge hulk of a man named Bob Heard—fresh out of the slam, on parole from a murder conviction. Riding shotgun was another, slimmer, Panther, an aide-de-camp from my hometown of Detroit. I turned my tape recorder on, and Huey was all mumbles and groans until he brought out his vial of coke. ("Care for some?" he asked. "No thanks," I said.) A

couple of toots later, his energy improved considerably. We made it to Sacramento on time. Bates did his job. Huey did his—remarkably well, I thought, knowing his state of mind. We got back into the big car and headed back to Oakland. Halfway through the return trip on Highway 80, everything turned into a mess—a potentially lethal mess. I was still interviewing Huey, but Huey had enough of his wits about him to keep his eyes on the road even when he was distracted by my questions. Good thing, or I'd be dead, too, and this would be a byline from hell. Huey was reflecting on the irony of his having gotten an award at the state capitol, the very place where the Panthers got their first big media-hit when—while he was still in jail—they invaded the joint, with guns and black leather.

He was reminiscing when—oops!—Big Bob fell asleep at the wheel; he'd finally crashed out from the weekend's activities and was about to crash us into the highway divider.

"Bob, Bob, Bob—look out!" Huey's shout awakened our driver, who managed to wake up in time to pull over onto the freeway shoulder. Not, however, without grazing a Mercedes driven by a young woman, quite blonde, who recognized Huey as soon as he emerged, hand in pocket.

"Sorry for that," he said.

"You're Huey Newton, aren't you?" she said.

"Yeah, and let's settle this now. How much do you think the damage is worth?"

"Geez, I don't know." Huey reached into his pocket and peeled off ten crisp \$100 bills.

"You think this will cover it?" he asked.

"Ummm, I guess so," she said, "but don't you think..."

"I think it will cover it," he said. She sort of nodded.

"Ken, you take the wheel." It was a command, not a request, and what's a guy to do in a situation like that? Big Bob got in the back seat, and I drove, as per instructions, to the MacArthur BART station, whereupon I relinquished the car keys.

"Sorry about that," he said as he abruptly bid me farewell. "Here's taxi fare." Another \$100 bill.

"Huey," I said. "It's only a five dollar ride."

"Keep the change," he said, and winked goodbye.

* * *

I'll never forget...

After I hired on with Huey, I took a reporter friend of mine to interview him in Santa Cruz, where Huey was finishing up his PhD in philosophy from UC Santa Cruz—he'd received "credit earned" for

his real-life activities. (He *did* get his PhD, and in his obit in the *New York Times*, he was primly referred to as "Dr. Newton.")

He was quite *un*scholarly on that particular day. He'd instructed us to meet him at his favorite Santa Cruz hangout, a restaurant and bar with an open-air cafe.

Huey was drunk as a skunk by the time we got there, but the best was yet to come. During the course of four hours, he waxed nostalgic about the past in answer to the pointed questions my friend from the *Washington Post* brought up, but as he got drunker and drunker, after liter upon liter of house white, he got more insane—and inane. It was a long, long session, and as the full moon started rising, he announced that he was, in fact, in training for the middleweight boxing title—"If I can punch out this thesis I have to do, I can sure punch out a man, man," he said. I sidled my eyes over to my reporter friend; anticipation, fear, and curiosity were the elements capturing her face.

"Hey, get up. Lemme show you how good I am. I won't hurt you."

She didn't move. So I became his stooge. "Stand up," he said. "I'll show you what I mean." I duly stood up, expecting the worst from his drunken fists and praying to the goddess of boxing for the best.

"Watch this!" Bam! That was maybe a

quarter inch from my face, the first shot. "Now, I'm gonna get a little bit closer. Get ready." Bam! Pretty close, but face still intact.

"One last shot. Move in a little closer."

I did, and I owe my chin, to this day, to

Drunk as a skunk and fool as a mule, Huey laughed at me for ducking. "Hey, man," he said. "I could have hurt you bad if I wanted to." Great, I said to myself. Go tell it to Immanuel Kant, you drunken existential little prick.



**"If he's our Moses,
then give me that old Pharaoh
Ramses any old day, and
I mean that."**

my Irish instincts—remember when all the Great White Hopes were Irish? I turned my face in the nick of time and he punched air.

The next day, I quit working for him. The subsequent *Washington Post* story described the incident in detail the next week. I heard Huey was furious. On the

ride back home from Santa Cruz, the *Post* reporter had said almost nothing—her worst fears had been confirmed. As had mine. She was scared shitless. So was I.

* * *

I'll never forget...

It was a Thanksgiving shindig in 1977 at Jerry Rubin's penthouse in the upper eighties on Manhattan's chic East Side. Jerry was fast becoming the *perfect* proto-Yuppie. He'd once been Eldridge Cleaver's vice-presidential candidate for the Peace and Freedom Party, and a member of the original Chicago eight (reduced to seven when Black Panther chairman Bobby Seale refused to be represented by anybody except famous left-wing attorney Charles Garry, who couldn't make it to Chicago because of gall-bladder surgery; bound, chained, gagged, shackled, Seale was yanked from the case by that senile old fart, Judge Julius Hoffman, since departed). Jerry had now decided that his place in life was to advance that activity called "networking": getting lots of rich white people to get to know each other and exchange business cards, a business in which he'd begun to prosper quite handsomely. Back then, Jerry's pathway to holistic heaven included occasional mini-events at his

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red-carpeted digs.

Sounds banal? Thanksgiving, 1977, was not, because among the invited guests happened to be Bobby Seale and his entourage of Panther expatriates. I cornered Bobby right away and told him a story I'd just heard from California. Huey had dispatched a hit team to kill a key prosecution witness who had seen him shoot the young prostitute. The team got the wrong address; the guys hit the house next door, where a righteously wary middle-aged black woman, fully armed, opened fire, injuring one of the hired guns seriously.

It was strange. Jerry quickly ushered the entire Panther contingent into his small bathroom, and I was crammed in with the expatriates, all of whom were dying—forgive the word—to hear the news I'd just heard from my California sources. Jerry then went back to entertain his white guests.

I told the story as I knew it. Everybody seemed a little dazed by the news—except for Bobby. He took it all in stride. "Huey is out of control," he said in a slow low voice. Nature called—and what better place for it to call?—and after he zipped up his pants, he turned to his former compatriots and paused.

"Why do you think I left?" he said.

Bobby had fled the Panther house in Oakland one night in 1975, crawling

down the fire escape with his girlfriend because he was sure Huey was going to kill him. It's a scene he graphically depicts in the last chapter of his book, *A Lonely Rage*. He snuck out the window to save their lives. For a year thereafter, his whereabouts were not known.



I signed on to help Huey with his public relations. I just somehow didn't want to believe the rumors about him—it was my own political hangover. That's when things started to turn ugly—very ugly.

(When Bobby showed up at Huey's funeral and donned the old-time Panther raiment, black leather from top to bottom, shuckin' and jivin' about what a great hero Huey was, all I could think was, reread your own damn book! It's right there in print. In the immortal words of Casey Stengel, "You can look it up.")

I'll never forget...

It was after the boxing incident when I heard one last confession from Huey. We showed up at the same party one night and Huey was coked out of his skull. While he'd been in Cuba, he told me, he'd

Yeah, he was so sorry, just like he was sorry about killing the prostitute.

I think about my dead friend Betty almost every day. I'm sitting in her office chair right now—her daughter gave it to me—as I type out the words of what has to be the hardest piece I've ever written in all my years in journalism.

I'll never forget...

I went to the funeral home on the Sunday after his death. It was quite an outpouring—thousands of people. I stood in line for a long time, listening to the sad accolades of the mourners. Huey this, Huey that. I began to wonder why I was even doing this, but I kept on the queue because—well, I just *had* to do it. After an hour or so—it seemed like an eternity—there he was. Casket open, a bunch of blood-red flowers on his chest. The sickly-sweet scent of whatever undertakers use to present a corpse for public view was wafting heavily, stronger the closer you got. Huey looked immaculate.

I just had to get one last look at a guy I'd known so well—loving him, then hating him. It's always bizarre looking at somebody you once knew alive, now dead. He truly looked like a Madame Tussaud exhibit, a shiny, waxen-faced specimen. I stood there for just a few moments—there was quite a waiting line in back—for the final glimpse.

How did I feel?

Relieved.

And I'll never forget.

ordered the murder of a good friend of mine who had been hired to do bookkeeping for the Panthers. She'd refused orders to cook the books, to make them look legit, and had threatened to call the cops. Listening to Huey brought all the stupid, senseless bloodshed back home. It hadn't been a simple hit—she'd been tortured, raped, shot, and thrown into the bay.